

A Plan to End Extremism

FUCK ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is backing several extremely controversial initiatives against Islamic extremism. If he succeeds, it will mean radical changes in the lives of Malaysia's youth

By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTER Mahathir Mohamad is not going quietly. He has said he will retire from his post in October, but as he approaches his final months in office, he is backing several inevitably controversial initiatives. Taken together, these will address the roots of what he sees as the greatest threats to Malaysia today: the growth of Islamic extremism and the racial polarization of the nation's youth.

In pursuing these goals, the 77-year-old leader will be making a concerted effort to steer young Malaysian Muslims away from political Islam and extremism and into the arms of the ruling coalition.

In order to do so, he would roll back some programmes that were put in place years ago to elevate the status of the ethnic Malays who account for most of the coun-

try's Muslim majority. His mission would entail an ambitious overhaul of education in Malaysia that, if taken to its conclusion, would effectively purge Islamic instruction from Malaysia's daily curriculum.

Most parents in Malaysia enrol their children in a national school system in which the Malay language is the main medium of instruction and Islam is part of the curriculum for all Muslims. If they wish, they can instead send their children to an Islamic religious school, a Chinese school (in which Mandarin is the medium of instruction), a Tamil school or any one of a variety of private schools. All nonprivate schools are supported to some degree by government funding; private Islamic schools also receive some funding.

Mahathir made his priority clear in late November: "National schools should be the preferred choice," he said. "Besides, mixing with children from other races would help in national unity."

He has already put a temporary halt to government funding of private Islamic schools. The next step, according to a top

government adviser to the prime minister, will be to closely regulate the content of private Islamic education, which Mahathir says engages in "brainwashing."

The plans don't stop there. In early December, Hamid Othman, religious adviser to the prime minister, said the

government had decided to absorb the estimated **126,000** students studying in private Islamic schools into national schools to ensure they received "quality education."

Then, on December 12, in an as-yet-unreported meeting convened by Mahathir, a high-level committee of officials and educational advisers agreed to begin pushing for a new programme to deal with religion in the national school system. The plan would relocate religious instruction to special after-school classes with no political content.

To top off this careful restructuring of the lives of Malaysian youth, the prime minister seeks to institute compulsory national service for 18-year-old men in an effort to break down racial barriers and keep youth committed to national ideals.

MAHATHIR IS TRYING TO STEER YOUNG MUSLIMS AWAY FROM POLITICAL ISLAM AND EXTREMISM AND INTO THE ARMS OF THE RULING COALITION

In the light of revelations in the past year, it shouldn't be difficult to convince Malaysians they face an Islamic threat. Over the past year Malaysia has used its Internal Security Act, which permits indefinite imprisonment without trial, to arrest over 60 people it says are suspected terrorists. Among those detained are members of the Islamic group Jemaah Islamiah, which has been accused of a series of terror attacks including the devastating bombing in Bali on October 12.

The perceived extremist threat is great enough that Mahathir raised it in his speech to the nation on the Id-ul-Fitri holiday on December 6, marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. He spoke of Jemaah Islamiah's goal of forcibly creating a pan-Islamic state in

Southeast Asia. "They go to Pakistan . . . purportedly to learn Islam . . . but in fact they want to learn how to make bombs and rob banks, commit murder and terrorism in preparation to seize power in this country."

The educational and national service projects could strengthen the status of Malaysia-and its image abroad-as a moderate, progressive Islamic nation. But any change to the Malaysian educational system is extremely controversial, and sensitive even to Mahathir's own party, the United Malays National Organization, or Umno. The party is the pivot of the ruling coalition, the National Front, which has built its support base on a multi-ethnic doctrine and depends heavily on the support of the 40% of the population that is not Muslim.

But Umno has its own, specific Islamic threat to deal with: its increasingly powerful opposition from the Islamic Party of Malaysia, or Pas. The party has gained ground in recent elections, and has introduced Islamic legislation in the two states it governs out of Malaysia's 13 states. It is Umno's strongest competitor for the votes of the majority Malays.

Malaysia has had Islamic private education for more than 100 years. Schools range from prestigious institutions to dilapidated huts with poor facilities and worse standards. Their actual number and enrolment figures are uncertain as they are loosely regulated: No licence is required to open one.

Some government officials say that some schools are breeding grounds for militant Islam. One highly placed ►►

official charges that the "brainwashing" of students begins at a young age with children taking morning oaths to the virtues of jihad and martyrdom.

The more likely result of an Islamic education, and its greatest threat in the view of ruling-party politicians, is that it could breed support for Pas. The government has accused Pas of "politicizing" Malaysia's Islamic schools. Pas officials have denied this, and denounced proposals to close the religious schools.

Mahathir has said that members of his party who sent their children to such schools had complained that their children had come home asking their parents "to bring down pictures of the Pharaoh," a derogatory reference to the prime minister and the photos of him that families of Umno members keep in their homes.

In October, the government stopped funding for all private Islamic schools

"It is not necessary for all Muslims to become religious teachers, so there is no necessity for parents to clamour to send their children for religious education," Mahathir said in November.

But Islamic schools continue to be popular, in part because they serve a desire among Muslim parents to give just such an education to their children. The government estimates that at least 15,000 of the Muslim children who are pursuing private Islamic education do so because their parents find the national curriculum "too secular."

According to a senior government official, Mahathir's top education committee on December 12 tentatively approved a plan to adopt on a national level what southern Johor state has done for decades: There, all pupils go to school in the morning for "secular" education, and in the afternoon all Muslims

October, is meant to redress the divisive impact education has had on Malaysian youth of different races.

An indication of the growing ethnic divide: In 1964, 98% of ethnic Chinese children went to Malaysia's national schools; today the number is 5%, the remainder opting for Chinese or private education. The shift was due in part to a perceived decline in the quality of national education, and in part to the switch to the Malay language as a medium of instruction, from English.

THE RACES DIVIDED

The disappearance of Chinese from national schools has created a cleaving of the races that begins in primary school. National schools have now become overwhelmingly Malay. (Of Malaysia's population, 60% are Malay, 32% Chinese, 7% Indians and 3% others.)

The Brain Trust Report, according to government officials, recommends sweeping change, from more rigorous qualifications for teachers to a return to meritocracy and the creation of "elite" schools, which had been de-emphasized to accommodate a decades-long affirmative action plan for Malays, who had previously found it difficult to get into top schools.

As national schools became overtly Malay, Islamic studies became part of the school curriculum—albeit a small one, comprising four sessions a week.

The Brain Trust Report "seeks to Malaysian-ize education from its present Malay-ized status," says a person familiar with the report. He adds that a high government official told him that over 50% of the plan is likely to be implemented.

The report only skimmed the issue of religion. Mahathir's educational committee could also take religion out of the curriculum altogether. Under the December 12 plan, normal school hours would have no religious material, but all Muslim students would be required to attend two hours of religious education each afternoon, either at the school itself or in another location. Non-Muslims would be offered a choice to study their own mother tongue or their religion.

And if any youngsters have been led astray or "brainwashed" by a misguided education, Mahathir wants to intro- ►►

pending an appraisal, Mahathir said, "to find out which are religious schools and which are political ones."

He has also said that the government does not want to see Muslims knowledgeable in religious matters only. There are certainly more people trained in religion than there are jobs for them: When the government recently advertised for 100 religious teachers for the national school system, 4,000 people applied.

attend at least two hours of closely supervised and regulated Islamic education. The state spends at least 80 million ringgit (\$21 million) a year on Islamic education.

Moving Islamic instruction to special after-school classes may be just one part of a process of overhauling the national education system. A radical plan called the Brain Trust Report, commissioned by Mahathir and completed in

FEW MARKET JITTERS OVER THE TRANSITION

In the week following Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's announcement in June that he intended to step down from the job, the benchmark Composite Index of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange tumbled almost 6%. Since then, it's been even more listless. The market is so morose that observers can't help but wonder if Mahathir's impending departure and the uncertainty of the coming political transition are putting everyone in a bad mood.

The answer, according to most analysts, is that the global downturn must be to blame, because the market is not too worried about Mahathir's long goodbye. "The markets have already priced it in," says Gan Kim Khoo, head of equities research at AmSecurities in Kuala Lumpur. "I think it concluded that a phased withdrawal was far better than an abrupt departure."

Others agree. "If anything, it removed one of the biggest political risk premiums in Malaysia," says the head of a European securities firm, referring to what before June was a dark shadow of uncertainty about Mahathir's future.

In July, the United Malays National Organization, over which Mahathir presides, cobbled together a plan whereby the premier would step down to be replaced by his deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 65, in October 2003.

There is broad agreement that after Mahathir steps down he will also step out of politics, in contrast to Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's former premier, now senior minister.

Christopher Wood, a strategist with CLSA in Hong Kong, probably best articulated the feelings of foreign investors regarding the transition when he wrote in the November 21 edition of his company's weekly dispatch: "One suspects that most foreign investors would still prefer to see Dr. Mahathir there despite their love/hate relationship with the Malaysian prime minister." Over the years, many Western analysts have come away bemused by Mahathir's caustic rants against a host of evils from currency speculators to entire Western governments.

Despite his impending departure, the premier, who is also finance minister, still calls the shots. Last month he announced a cabinet reshuffle that included Jamaludin Jarjis, a senior Umno politician and chief of national utility Tenaga

Nasional, as second finance minister.

Some uncertainty remains, however. Abdullah has given little indication about how he would lead the country. Visiting economists who have met him say that he repeatedly stresses, political and policy continuity as his main agenda.

In addition, many Malaysians believe Abdullah only plans to serve a single term before making way for current defence minister Najib Razak. They could be in for a surprise. Abdullah has told a close confidant that he intends "to stick around for at least two terms."

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duce mandatory national service for the 300,000 Malaysians who turn 18 every year. "It's the best way to force the races to mix," says an Umno official. "And it's a good way to shape young minds." Umno has in the past rejected any proposals for required military service.

The Defence Ministry will soon begin evaluating plans and getting public feedback before drawing up proposals for the cabinet to consider. It has not yet been decided what form military service would take. However it is done, it will be certainly be very expensive.

With Mahathir's continued dominance of Malaysian politics, he may be the one man who can push through such controversial plans. "Dr. Mahathir may be prepared to take on some of Umno's sacred cows," says Michael Yeoh, who heads a Kuala Lumpur think-tank, the Asian Strategic Leadership Institute. "He may be the only one who can."

Many Umno members can be expected to oppose the plans for an educational overhaul on the grounds that they will undo some affirmative-action measures that have benefited Malays. Pas will

likely oppose them on the grounds that they are un-Islamic.

But some officials seem confident. "These things should have been done more than 10 years ago," says the person familiar with the Brain Trust Report. And if Mahathir doesn't get it all done by October, there's always his successor, Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Abdullah has said Umno is "committed to the projection of Islam in a positive light," and to preventing extremism from taking root. Whether he can carry Mahathir's torch remains to be seen. ■